

### Fast 17: The attributes of God

- Among the attributive names of God occurring in the Holy Quran, four stand out prominently, and these four are exactly the names mentioned in the Opening chapter, *Surah Fatiha*. This chapter, by a consensus of opinion, and according to a saying of the Holy Prophet, is the essence of the Quran.
- The chapter opens with the proper name Allah. Then comes the greatest of all attributive names *Rabb* which, for want of a proper equivalent, is translated as “Lord”.

“Praise be to Allah, the Lord (*Rabb*) of the worlds.” — ch. 1, v. 1

- *Rabb* means one who **fosters** something. As a name of God, it means the Lord Who brings all that is in this universe to a state of perfection through various stages of development. These stages include the most elementary stages, as well as those which are furthest back in time, so much so that as we go back farther and farther, they dwindle into nothingness. This means that the word *Rabb* carries with it the idea of the Author of all existence. *Rabb* is thus the chief attribute of God. Hence it is that prayers are generally addressed to *Rabb*, and begin with the words *Rabba-nā*, that is, “our Lord”. Indeed, after the proper name Allah, the Quran has given the greatest prominence to the name *Rabb*.
- The order adopted by the Holy Quran in speaking of the Divine attributes is quite logical. Allah, the proper name, comes first of all in the Opening chapter, and this is followed by *Rabb*, the most important of the attributive names. While the name Allah is found in the Holy Quran some 2800 times, *Rabb* occurs about 960 times, no other name being so frequently mentioned.
- Next in importance to *Rabb* are the names *Raḥmān* (Beneficent), *Raḥīm* (Merciful) and *Mālik* (Master), which follow *Rabb* in the Opening chapter:

“The Beneficent, the Merciful, Master of the day of Recompense.” —1: 2–3

These three names in fact show how the attribute of ‘*bringing to perfection by fostering*’ is brought into play.

- Both *Raḥmān* and *Raḥīm* are derived from the same root, conveying the ideas of love and mercy.
- *Raḥmān* signifies that love is so predominant in the Divine nature that He bestows His favours and shows His mercy even though man has done nothing to deserve them. The granting of the means of subsistence for the development of physical life, and of Divine revelation for man’s spiritual growth, are due to this attribute of unbounded love which God displays.

- Then follows the stage in which man takes advantage of these various means which help the development of his physical and spiritual life, and turns them to his use. It is at this stage that the third attribute of God, i.e. *Rahīm*, comes into play, whereby He rewards every effort made by man in the right direction; and since man is making constant and continual efforts, the attribute of mercy conveyed in the name *Rahīm* is also displayed all the time. This is true both as regards the physical and spiritual development of man.
- Just as following the guidance results in the advancement of man which brings reward, disobedience to the guidance must result in retarding his progress or bringing down punishment upon him. In fact, punishment is only a different phase of the exercise of the attribute of fostering; for ultimate good is still the object. Therefore, just as God needs to be *Rahīm* so that He brings reward to one who does good, there must be another attribute of God to bring about the result of doing evil.
- Hence in the Opening chapter of the Quran, *Rahīm* is followed by *Mālikī yaum al-dīn* or “Master of the Day of Recompense”. The use of the word *Mālik*, or Master, in connection with the requital of evil, is significant, as ordinarily it would be expected that there should be a **judge** to mete out the requital of evil. The essential difference between a judge and a **master** is that the judge is bound to do justice and must punish the evil-doer for every evil, while the master can exercise his discretion, and may either punish the evil-doer or forgive him and pass over even the greatest of his wrong-doings.
- The Quran tells us repeatedly that while good is rewarded ten times over or even more, evil is either forgiven or punished with an equal punishment:

“Whoever brings a good deed will have tenfold like it, and whoever brings an evil deed, will be recompensed only with the like of it, and they shall not be wronged.” — 6:160

Note that ‘*tenfold like it*’ is the **minimum** reward for good deeds, and ‘*the like of it*’ is the **maximum** punishment for evil.

- In one place, indeed, the unbounded mercy of God is said to be so great that “He forgives sins altogether” (39:53). Hence the attributive name *Mālik* is introduced to link the idea of punishment with that of forgiveness. This is why, while the Opening chapter mentions the name *Mālik* as the next in importance to *Rahīm*, in the body of the Quran it is the name *Ghāfir* (Forgiving) which occupies that place of importance.
- It will be seen that the Quran gives prominence to the attributes of love and mercy in God to an extent which is not to be matched by any other revealed book.